

Fitzroy

BY EDDIE BIRCH

'Patagonia? Never heard of it', I said.

It was closing time in the Padarn — neither the time nor the place to discuss the drunken, though enthusiastic, ravings of Guy Lee. Whilst being politely ushered through the door into a wild and wet Welsh night, my parting words to Guy were 'Give us a ring, kid', and with that I ceased at the time to give the matter any more thought.

In the tip of South America, in the region known as Patagonia, is one of nature's freaks. This is the great 'Hielo Continental', the Patagonian Ice-cap; thousands of square miles of largely unexplored icy wilderness. Along the Eastern flank of this immense glacier system lie the Patagonian 'Cordillera de los Andes', a range of strange inhospitable mountains, thrusting their ice-festooned heights into an atmosphere constantly lashed with winds which sweep in across the ice-cap with hurricane force. Some are tall slender rock peaks encrusted with snow and ice; others delicately fluted ice peaks.

Dominating this area, both in terms of heights and mass, is Fitzroy, surely one of the world's most impressive mountains. Deceived by the plumes of mist constantly blown off its crest, the Indians call it 'Chalten', thinking it to be a volcano; this is still its official name in Chile. First climbed in 1952 by the great French team of Terray and Magnone, it has subsequently been climbed by teams from Argentina and from the U.S.A., but deservedly keeps its reputation.

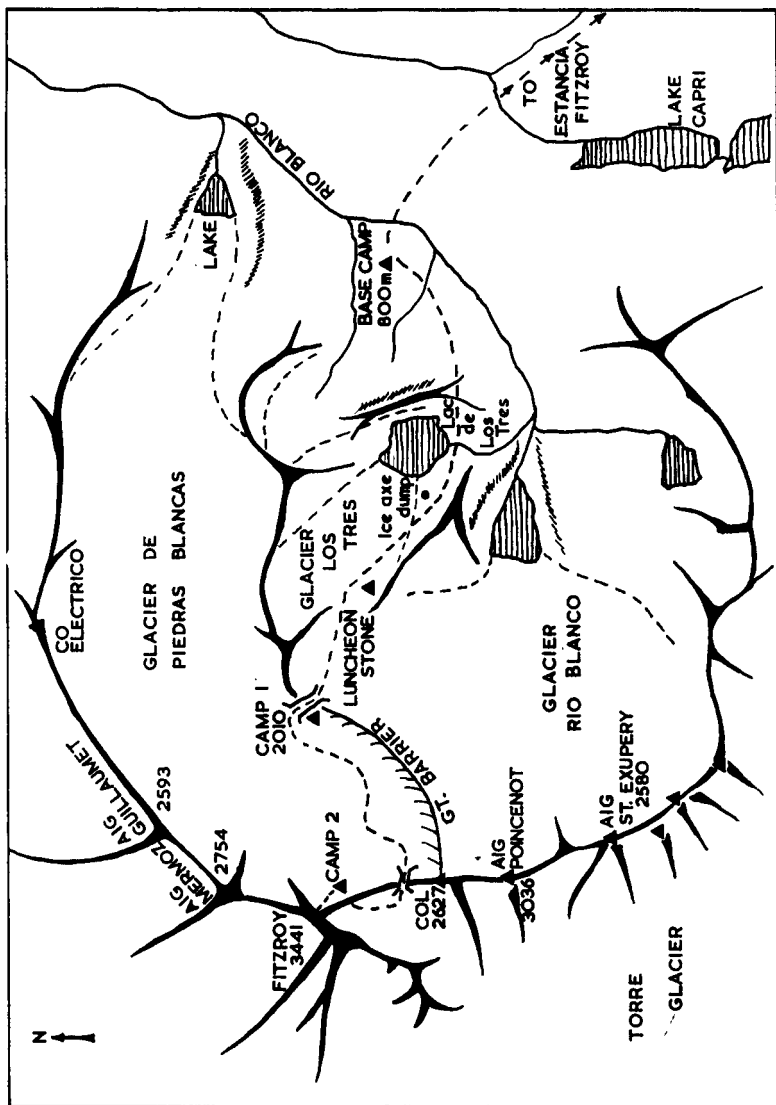
The British Argentinian Expedition 1972 was the brain-child of Dave Nichol and Guy Lee. They did most of the preparatory work and it was less than three weeks before the date of departure when Dave telephoned to ask me to join the expedition. A rather disconcerting look at my bank balance could not put me off a trip to Fitzroy, and after a minimum of organisation I found myself flying to South America with Guy Lee and Mo Anthoine. Dave and Jean Nichol had travelled out by boat with the Volkswagen packed with vast quantities of gear and food. On the way they were to pick up Ian Wade, an

Englishman now living in the United States. The team was completed by Larry Derby, an American from Colorado, who made his own way to Patagonia.

We all met as arranged at the Rio Fitzroy and then had to spend a week dealing with the red tape concerning climbing parties in the National Parks of Argentina. It was a relief finally to get official permission and to be able to get on with the job in hand. Senor Rocca, a local rancher, arrived with a pair of rather flamboyant gauchos who were to lead horses up to Base Camp, a distance of about eight miles. It took them half a day to pack the horses, some of which were obviously unfamiliar with the theory of load-carrying — when the party finally set off one of them bolted and ended up scattering its load all along the banks of the Rio Fitzroy. The main Base Camp was situated on the edge of a forest above the Rio Blanco. We all arrived some time before the gauchos and horses; much to our relief they turned up just before dark. The horses were quickly unpacked, and after a quick drink of Tres Plumas (a gut-rot brandy) the gauchos set off on their return journey, disappearing into the evening gloom like characters in some popular Western.

A week of good weather enabled us to establish an ice cave three thousand feet above base on the same site as the French Camp One, on a col at the eastern end of the Greta Barrier at the entrance to the Piedras Blancas glacier. The cave was stocked after many back-breaking trips carrying loads over moraine and glacier. Everybody carried loads or excavated the cave as they felt inclined; both tasks were equally exhausting.

The time now came to make a decision as to which route we should attempt. The East Face route, the scene of many frustrated attempts, was voted against because of the sheer logistics of supplying climbers on the face with the limited manpower available (and, human nature being what it is, because we all wilted when confronted with such a huge obstacle). It was decided to attempt the mountain by its South Ridge, a problem which while being technically of great difficulty, would be somewhat shorter than the East Face and more in keeping with our limited quantities of gear and food. The decision was a difficult one, all the same. However, the prime object in all our minds was that of getting to the summit, and since nobody was interested in becoming a 'Magnificent Failure', all our efforts were directed at the South Ridge route.



The overriding problem, so far as we were concerned, was provided by the weather. We had already had two weeks of almost continuous fine weather, a near miracle in itself, and so, if we were to achieve anything it would have to be in a series of short quick pushes in between the periods of bad weather we felt were bound to arrive any day now. We did not have long to wait for its arrival.

The ice camp at Camp One had been established and made comfortable with three tents inside, a haven from the gradually worsening weather. We were indeed fortunate to have had enough fine weather at least to get established at the foot of the mountain. The first of many storms found Larry, Mo, Guy and me cut off at Camp One. After three days spent sleeping and eating (tartan shortbreads were a great favourite), we emerged from the cave into blinding sunlight and ferocious winds. Guy and I decided to return to base camp. During the descent of the ice ridge below Camp One we experienced our first fight with the fiendish elements which inhabit these regions. Guy and I had paused on our descent of the exposed ridge to take a photograph when we were set upon by winds of such force that they threatened to hurl us headlong down the glacier far below. Digging our axes in and lying on them, it was just a matter of hanging on for all we were worth while waiting for the wind to abate. The wind, carrying its burden of burning ice, made it impossible to see more than a few yards, the surface of the ice becoming a seething turmoil of racing light. Guy, in his keenness to capture the fury of wind and spindrift on film, forgot to attach his sack to his axe whilst taking a shot, and as he did so the wind whipped up the sack and sent it with its £150 worth of equipment sailing down the convex slope and out of our sight.

Fortunately the wind abated sufficiently for us to descend 700 feet or so to reach the fixed ropes lower down the ridge. We were somewhat sheltered in the lee of the ridge now and quickly descended the fixed rope over the bergschrund which enabled us to reach the lower section of the Los Tres glacier which led down to our dump of gear at the Luncheon Stone. After unsuccessfully scanning the glacier for the sack — nature having no doubt deposited it for safe keeping in one of the many crevasses — we continued our descent to the Los Tres Lake, which is still frozen over at this early stage of the season.

The weather at Base Camp was incredibly fine, while raging turmoil still surrounded the summits. Spring makes its presence felt at this height, bringing with it that fresh rebirth of nature which is always a pleasure to behold. Emerald-green beeches contrast sharply with their many gaunt and naked relatives which were burnt to the ground aeons ago. Many lakes can be seen from just above the base camp, like facets of jewels, while domes and outcrops of red porphyry give contrasting shades as in a well-balanced water-colour. The skies are always wild and dramatic, truly of a kind rarely seen in other mountain areas. Between the sky and the foothills of the Fitzroy group one can see, at a distance of thirty miles, the vast expanse of Largo Viedma; an inland sea of vivid aquamarine stretching as far as the eye can see, dotted here and there with tiny white jewels of ice floating on its placid surface. Here one can sit and absorb a vista of indescribable beauty. The beauty lies partly in the total isolation of the area. No paths, huts, telepheriques and the other trappings of the Alpine scene; the country is as it always has been, unmarked by man's intrusion.

With improvement in the weather the upward grind begins again and we are able to carry loads up to the ice cave. Only two thousand feet above the placid tranquillity of Base Camp one enters a different world, still in the grip of the icy winter, snow and ice not yet having receded to uncover the many species of flowers and lichens which we were to notice on our final descent many weeks later. Six hours of hard labour takes us to the cave of Camp One after wading through waist-deep snow. Ian and Dave carry on to the Piedras Blancas glacier to prospect the route up the couloir to the saddle while the rest of us get some of the gear dried out in the sunshine.

Next day while Guy, Larry, Mo and I returned down to the Luncheon Stone for more loads, Dave and Ian with an armoury of ice- and rock-gear attacked the bergschrund at the foot of the couloir. This involved climbing an ice wall of forty feet and must have been a considerable tour de force. Once this obstacle was overcome the rest of the couloir was more accommodating and by the end of the day they had fixed ropes to within twenty feet of the Col de los Italianos. A brilliant day's work in such soft conditions.

After another night in the comparatively pleasant atmosphere of the ice cave, we all set out with heavy loads, sinking into the

soft snow up to our knees. Two hours later we reached the fixed rope dangling free above the abyss of the bergschrund. My first efforts at jumarring were watched with considerable amusement by my companions. The vast quantities of literature on this subject, which I had read previously, did not seem to be of much help to me in my present predicament! However, with the minimum of technique and not a little effort I finally dragged myself, panting and breathless, over the lip of the schrund and into the easier-angled section of the couloir.

In a few hours we were all on the saddle, and while the others started to dig the ice cave on the East side of the saddle, Guy and I attacked the South Ridge at a point where the crest met the snow ridge of the saddle a few hundred feet above the ice cave. The climbing was on very compact rock; superb red granite, only broken by a single ice-choked crack, the ascent of which demanded the use of pitons. Pitches were pegged and cleaned and slowly we gained height. On the third pitch Guy took a fall when a nut on which he was resting came out, resulting in a damaged hand. With some difficulty he extricated himself. We fixed ropes and then descended to the saddle, from where the lads had been watching our rather slow progress.

The situation of the climbing was superb, with views across to the Torre peaks in the west, and the vertical mile of the East Pillar over on our right dominating everything on this side of the mountain. After a quick brew on the saddle, Guy and I descended the couloir and glacier to Camp One to fix Guy's hand, while the others were to continue work on the cave and on the pillar next day. The slog down and across the glacier took its toll — we were very tired when we reached the bergschrund guarding the approach to the ice cave. We were expecting to meet Mo, who should have returned from Base, but there was no sign of him. We made a brew and did some running repairs to Guy's hand, all the time worrying about Mo. Alas, we were too tired to do anything about Mo, and after many brews of tea and soup, turned into spend a rather anxious night. Fortunately the worry was unfounded and we were awakened next morning at seven by the arrival of Mo; as usual with a grin on his face. He told us how he had tried to get up the glacier the previous evening, but, thwarted in the attempt by the dangerous state of the glacier, he returned to the Luncheon Stone and bivvied there to await the better conditions which would come with the dawn.



Fitzroy Granite

Eddie Birch

After a lazy day we had a good night's sleep and next morning loaded up and set off again at six o'clock. The snow conditions were crisp and enabled us to reach the schrund in an hour, and after the ascent of the couloir we arrived on the saddle at ten thirty. We found Dave and Ian high on the pillar making slow but impressive progress up the crack system which split the central section of the pillar.

We spent the day extending the ice-cave and drying out Dave and Ian's sodden sleeping gear on the sun-lit rocks of the saddle. We had time now to look around us and appreciate the tremendous work of Mother Nature at her most energetic. Around five in the afternoon, the weather began to deteriorate and we retired to the ice-cave and out of the wind which was gradually increasing in force. At seven Dave and Ian returned and told us of their progress. We were left with no illusions as to the difficulty of the climbing, and I, for one, was secretly thankful that I would be able to ascend this section on jumars.

The weather outside gradually got worse and we began to realise what the term 'Patagonian weather' involves. 'How long will it last?', we wondered. After three days of a dripping water torture with all the gear wet and a shortage of food becoming imminent we decided to make an attempt at getting ourselves down to base. The retreat down to the couloir was quite what we had expected; bent double against the wind, it was a constant battle to stay on one's feet. Being roped together provided an illusion of security; a case of 'One off, all off'. Once in the couloir, one was sheltered from the main force of the wind and stinging hail only to be constantly showered with a soaking spindrift which permeated everything. However, once on the fixed ropes, it was not long before we all arrived down on the glacier up to our waists in soft snow. All roped together, all moving at different speeds, it was a comical sight; some being pulled and some being pushed; some of us falling into hidden crevasses and being laughed at by companions, who, in their turn, found the hidden monsters waiting for them.

We all arrived at camp one safely however, and were rejuvenated with a hot drink, after which we continued the descent to base camp, arriving there at about four o'clock. Perversely, the weather improved in the late evening and next day was cold but sunny and were able to get all the gear dried out. Everybody was tired after a week of hard work and some

big problems were still in front of us. At least, we had now fixed a thousand feet of rope above the saddle. In the early evening of the following day we set off yet again with loads, having watched the weather slowly improve all day. We arrived at the Los Tres Lake to see billowing black clouds swirling in around the peaks on either side of the Fitzroy, the summit of which is still piercing a cloudless blue sky. We climbed up to the ice-axe dump and deposited most of our loads of food and gear there and decided, because of the apparently imminent deterioration in the weather, to return to Base. However, arriving back at the Los Tres Lake the weather improved a little and we bivvied for the night by the lakeside.

A cold and starry night brought with it a magnificent dawn, and setting off again, picking up en route our gear stowed on the previous night, we continued up to the ice-cave arriving there at nine a.m. Not, as we hoped, in brilliant weather, but in a wind which had quickly increased to gale force, bringing with it heavy black clouds which accompanied our upward progress.

Mo, Guy, Larry and I spent three more frustrating days in the ice-cave till, finally, Guy and I decided to return to base. Our first attempt was abandoned when Guy was blown off his feet within ten yards of the ice-cave. A few hours later we set out again and though the weather was still foul we found the wind had relented somewhat. The descent proved a miserable affair, the glacier and moraine back to the Los Tres Lake and thence back to base camp reminding me of a cold wet day spent ascending some remote Scottish Ben.

During the past week the winds had reached their full force around the upper half of the mountain and we were sampling what one might call normal 'Patagonian' weather, the noise of which would have done justice to a busy Loco junction in the golden age of steam. Down at base camp foul weather continued and for four days we kept ourselves busy making improvements in the log cabin, a legacy of a previous Italian expedition to Fitzroy. They must have had plenty of bad weather in order to have the time to build such a weather-proof and homely structure. Weather, and a general malaise which didn't help to relieve our boredom, but which had the effect of stirring us into some semblance of activity which was, however, quickly stifled by the unexpected arrival of Mo and Larry, who informed us of the

atrocious conditions higher up the mountain, having experienced considerable difficulty during their descent. Fortunately, the weather improved in the next few days and with everyone fit and eager to renew the effort, we set off without further delay.

The ropes, which had been fixed more than two weeks previously, would doubtless be in need of repair because of the constant abrasion in the high wind. It was decided, therefore, that Mo, Guy, Larry and myself would go up to the lower ice-cave with food for a week or so, and await a spell of good weather which we felt sure was due to arrive anytime! A little hope takes one a long way, was our new philosophy. In the event, our arrival at the Luncheon Stone coincided with yet another break in the weather and made us wonder whether or not the first two weeks had, indeed, been our Patagonian summer. However, the ascent of the upper section of the glacier was uneventful and we arrived at the ice-cave not quite soaked through. Once inside we were able to shut out the weather and hibernate for a few days. As good as Beudy Mawr, except for no beer and no Playboy magazines. Of course, one is obliged to make certain sacrifices. Three days were spent eating, sleeping and reading, with the odd game of bridge to relieve the boredom. Towards the end of the third day, Dave and Ian arrived bringing with them an improvement in the weather; a pleasant change indeed. The following morning, with more than ample loads, we set out across the glacier. The ascent of the couloir to the saddle was made very difficult by the icy conditions and ropes that were also heavily iced, making the use of jumars a bit suspect, as they constantly slipped when the cams iced up. Eventually, we gained the saddle, though not without some difficulty; the ropes now somewhat frayed.

The view from the saddle was quite breathtaking. To describe the scene I can only quote M. A. Azema when he said in his book 'The Conquest of Fitzroy' 'I seemed to be looking at supernatural monsters, a fantastic ride of the Valkyries, nightmare aiguilles stared across at us, hurled defiance and then vanished. From a bubbling devil's cauldron, where clouds heavy as pitch boiled up from the depths and eddies of snow chased each other in the gale, there emerged at intervals the summits of the Cerro Torre and its satellites. Like immovable reefs in a raging sea, the black slabs reared up towards the sky to be smothered by the stupendous ice-caps, sparkling with fresh snow,

which over-hung on all sides — glittering lighthouses whose foundations were submerged in foam'. This is how we, too, saw it.

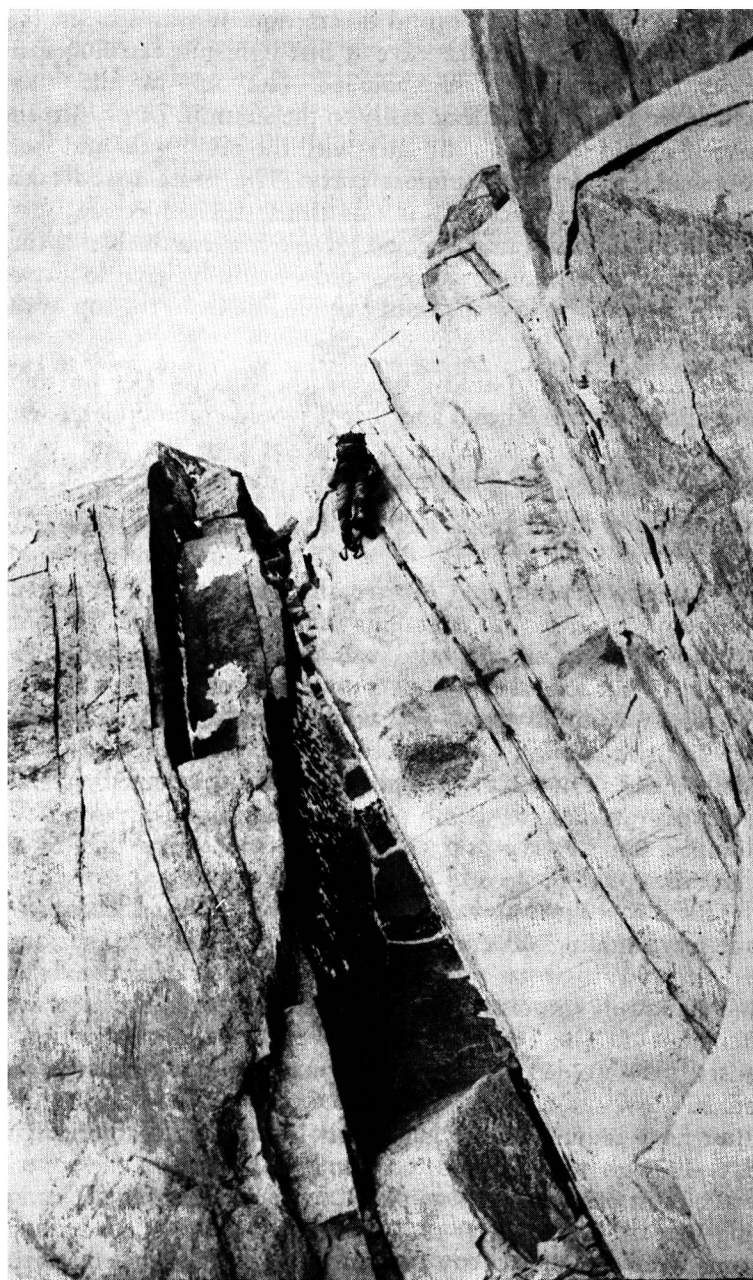
The ice-cave of camp two, which was situated on the leeward side of the saddle, at the foot of the south ridge, was in the same position as the French Camp Three of 1952, and was approached via a descent of a few feet down a sixty degree ice-slope. The situation never failed to make us aware of the seriousness of our position when either approaching or leaving the cave; a slip would have meant one following the course of our brew can which had made the descent to the glacier after Dave had been asked to empty out some slops. He had forgotten where he was and inadvertently let it go. The descent to the glacier, being two thousand feet, was not one that appealed to us and so a fixed rope and large bucket steps were soon installed and appreciated.

After the arrival at the saddle the remainder of the afternoon was spent drying equipment which had been in the ice cave for more than two weeks and was in a damp condition. This task being completed, we set about enlarging the cave to take the two tents we had decided to instal. This latter job, requiring many hours of laborious chopping in solid ice, was one which only Mo relished and the power and finesse with which he used the axe saved us all many hours of toil. In the early evening Larry pegged the first pitch again in order to place a new fixed rope, the previous one having parted in the recent bad weather. We all wondered how much would be left of the thousand feet which had been fixed with so much effort; and what state they would be in? After a pleasant and comfortable night Mo and I set off up the fixed rope next morning. However, due to the recent bad weather and the obvious poor state of the fixed ropes it was necessary to climb each pitch using a safety rope and putting in pitons for protection as one jumarrered up the fixed ropes. We found some of the ropes almost severed through and it was at times most nerve-racking, the ropes being tied off and adjusted as we ascended. For a while Mo was out of my sight and a misunderstanding resulted in the pair of us climbing up for a few pitches unprotected. I arrived at a ledge-system to see Mo ascending the following fixed rope, a pitch above me. As I ascended, approaching the rope that Mo was jumarring we had a traumatic experience. Mo no doubt thought his number was up; I know I did when I saw him fall off in a cloud of soft snow,

brilliantly silhouetted against the blue sky. Fortunately, his jumars clamps held on the rope thus arresting his fall and he was able to climb up and discover what had happened. A quick burst of adrenalin and he had reached the top of the rope and was able to realise the cause of the mishap. The top of the rope was still securely pegged behind a large, partly detached spike. The slack, amounting to about fifteen feet, having been previously drawn up, knotted and looped over the spike. The wind had blown the loop off its spike and dropped it and the slack, behind a block. It had frozen in! As he neared the spike the frozen snow gave way and released all the slack, the resultant fall being about twenty feet.

We regained our composure and continued upwards and onto the great crack which Ian and Dave had climbed. We were amazed at the difficulty they must have encountered and were thankful that we were able to ascend it with so little effort. Luckily, we had no more mishaps and after four hours of climbing arrived at the previous high point of Dave and Ian. We promptly dug out all the pegging gear from under the fresh snow, and Mo led off up the continuation of the crack, leaving it after forty feet in favour of a somewhat diagonal crack narrower which led off to the left and into an narrow icy chimney. This enabled him to reach, after a rope length, a small stance directly above me. I followed, de-pegging as I went, though not without difficulty, and arrived to find not a stance at all; just a couple of pegs and an icy foot-hold. "Good lead, Mo" I said and asked if he fancied another? He politely declined my offer and handed me the gear. I continued up a steep chimney crack. A long pitch brought me to easier ground below the top of the pillar. Two more pitched at an accomodating angle brought us to a small col above and behind the pillar where it abutted against the main mass of the mountain. Although the time was only 4-30 p.m. we had come to an obvious parting of the ways where we had the choice of two or more possible lines. We decided to descend and confer with the lads regarding the route to be taken. Ropes were fixed and all the gear left at the high point; then a speedy and exhilarating descent found us once more at the ice-cave.

Over many brews we discussed the chances of a summit bid and decided to make an early start next day, assuming that the weather held out; as indeed it did. The weather next



Ian Wade on Crux Pitches

Guy Lee

morning was beautiful beyond description. It was decided that Ian, Guy and Dave would leave at first light just carrying spare ropes for fixing the last thousand feet up to the ridge which we knew would lead easily to the summit. Larry, Mo and myself would follow a little later with the bivvy gear and spare ropes and to act as a support party. The route to be taken from our high point was, at this time, still conjecture but a leftward diagonal ramp seemed to offer a reasonable chance of success. The leading party would obviously have to decide on the spot and follow the most feasible line from the top of the fixed ropes.

Next morning I told Guy and the lads to 'Get up there and knock it on the head' and that 'I would come up later with the butties'. Thus the 'A' team set off at 3-30 a.m. and we all wondered what the outcome of this day would be. It was December 11 and six weeks after our arrival at the foot of the mountain.

Later in the morning Mo set off and Larry and I retrieved more rope from the lower couloir and it was quite late when we finally set off after Mo who was already out of sight. The weight of our loads soon made a noticeable effect on us and our progress was not as fast as we would have liked. At least mine was not fast enough for Larry. However, after three hours we reached the previous day's high point and discovered that the lads had decided to climb up via the diagonal ramp. We dumped some of the gear as it now seemed more than likely that we would be up and down without a bivouac. Following the fixed ropes was no easier in spite of our reduced loads, with our feet skidding off constantly on the icy surface. The ramp led on upwards between an impressive sweep of convex slabs and an equally impressive overhanging head-wall. The view was tremendous. The Poincenot, now well below us, attracting a misty halo golden in the afternoon sun. The climbing was mixed snow and ice, with a couple of steep pegging pitches, and must have required some hard work by the lads earlier in the day. Though we only had to ascend on jumars up the ropes I was almost desperate on one pitch . . . a hundred foot of dangling despair it seemed at the time. Fortunately, all bad things come to an end and shortly afterwards we reached the end of the fixed ropes. Two short pitches brought Larry and myself out on the summit ridge in dazzling sunshine to be met by Ian, Dave,

Guy and Mo on their way down. We set off promptly up the final ridge. The climbing was pleasant — reminiscent of a Welsh or Lakeland winter classic — and we reached the summit in about forty-five minutes. We were very fortunate to have finally made it after so much hard work and effort by all the team. We did not stay long; only long enough to take a few photographs. After doing so, Larry just said 'well Eddie, we've climbed Fitzroy; so what!' I felt empty inside, the spell broken. Somehow, perhaps it was an anticlimax. Suddenly, I was so tired. I expected to be elated but found myself mentally drained and wanted to get down as quickly as possible. The weather seemed ready to break and we could not hang around for pleasantries, so set off retracing our upward tracks.

In spite of breaking my crampons we descended rapidly to our point of arrival on the ridge. A last look round at the stupendous view of the ice-cap, the Hielo Continental and the clouds swirling round the Tome. It was something that we will never forget. Some hair raising abseils brought us to the top of the pillar. We picked up our bivvy gear and continued the descent in gradually worsening weather. Descending those badly frayed ropes many climbing experiences came to mind. The memory of untold hours in those ice-caves; the interminable slopes up the glacier still far below us would become a fading nightmare. There are, however, many aspects of our expedition which none of us will readily forget, certainly not myself. The willingness of all my companions to do more than their share, and the humour with which they did it, sometimes in the most trying circumstances, made the experience something to remember.

Few expeditions have been so fortunate as ours in the ability of its members to maintain a harmonious and cordial working friendship; a fact at the time, taken for granted, but on reflection one for which we were all very grateful to our companions. The weather deteriorated rapidly and never again did the sun reappear for long during our remaining stay below the mountain. Another eleventh hour ascent of Fitzroy had been made. It was snowing when we got back to the ice-cave at 8-30 to be greeted with a hand-shake and a brew from the lads.

The adventure was over. The end of a dream had come.

Fitzroy South Ridge

2,000 feet of difficult climbing

First Ascent: 14th December, 1972, by the British Argentinian Expedition 1972:

Dave Nichol (leader), Mo Anthoine (CC), Eddie Birch (RC, ACG), Larry Derby (USA), Guy Lee (Notts CC), Ian Wade (USA).

The expedition arrived at Base Camp on 28th October, 1972, and left on 20th December, 1972. All members of the expedition reached the summit on 14th December.

Camps One and Two were in ice caves at approx. 2000m and 28000m. All the technical climbing started above Camp Two.

Start at an obvious crack system at the foot of S. ridge just to the L. of the snow crest.

Pitch 1 Climb three long sections up cracks and a smooth diedre to a long terrace. A2, A1.

Pitch 2 Climb up easily for 200 feet to the foot of a superb crack system which splits the magnificent pillar above. Climb this for six sustained pitches (V & VI), using aid where possible. A terrace is reached just below the top of the pillar where an easy pitch on L leads one to a col (IV).

Pitches 10, 11 From the col descent slightly L. and travers diagonally L. for 3 rope lengths up and L. along the obvious diagonal ramp to a steep corner barring further progress (IV, III ice and mixed climbing).

Pitch 12 Climb corner for 60 feet and continue following the ramp to another overhanging corner chimney (A1, IV).

Pitch 13 Ascend the overhanging wall R. of chimney (A2) move L. into chimney at the top and climb up to stance and belay.

Pitches 14, 15, 16 Ascend the obvious ramp until the smooth headwall is reached, descend slightly L. and onto the crest of the ridge (IV).
Climb the ridge easily (?) to the summit (approx. 45 min.).